

## NEW YORK POLITICS

# NYPD no-show at Council hearing for SRG riot unit at George Floyd protests sparks outrage, lawmakers threaten funding cuts

By Michael Gartland  
New York Daily News

The NYPD's failure to testify in person at a City Council hearing Wednesday prompted lawmakers to threaten cuts to its funding and to use Council subpoena powers to force police officials to show up if they fail to appear again.

The hearing, which was held at City Hall and grew heated several times, focused on the NYPD's [Strategic Response Group](#), a unit often used to respond to civil unrest and which played a controversial role in the George Floyd protests that roiled the city two years ago.



People attend a rally before a City Council oversight hearing at City Hall on March 1, 2023 in New York. (Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images)

Fuming Council members, defense attorneys and people testifying from the public demanded that the unit be disbanded, citing overaggressive tactics and a litany of complaints that were substantiated by the city's Civilian Complaint Review Board.

Many also called for the unit's funding to be redirected away from the NYPD completely and [instead be devoted to programs such as violence interrupters](#).

"I'm p----d," Councilwoman Tiffany Caban said. "I can't take my eyes off of the empty seats where NYPD should be sitting today. Shame on them for not showing up."

Instead of testifying in the City Council chambers — as other city agencies have traditionally done over the years — the NYPD submitted only written testimony to the lawmaking body. In it, NYPD Director of Legislative Affairs Michael Clarke said that due to litigation over the [2020 George Floyd protests](#) now pending in federal court, the Police Department was "not able to answer any questions at this time."



City Councilmember Tiffany Caban speaks at a press conference in Brooklyn, New York, on Wednesday, July 21, 2021. (Shawn Inglima/for New York Daily News)

A spokesman for Mayor Adams, a former NYPD captain, declined to comment on the matter and referred questions to the city's Law Department.

"Most of the SRG topics that the Council is interested in learning more about directly overlap with what is being discussed in ongoing negotiations, which the court has directed remain confidential," Law Department spokesman Nick Paolucci said. "NYPD looks forward to discussing more about SRG practices when the litigation is resolved."

Two prior oversight hearings on the Strategic Response unit — in December and January — had been [deferred prior to Wednesday's hearing](#).

It came at a crucial time for both the NYPD and the bodies tasked with its oversight. Not only is the [Council in the midst of negotiating the next city budget](#) — a process likely to become contentious over NYPD funding — but the city also agreed Thursday

to shell out payments of more than \$21,000 per person in a settlement relating to the 2020 Floyd protests. The proposed settlement, which was first reported in *The New York Times*, is awaiting a judge's approval and could cost the city anywhere between \$4 million and \$6 million.

The hearing also comes after the Council's progressive caucus shed several members over their refusal to sign on to a mission statement that included calls to slash the NYPD's budget.



People attend a rally before a City Council Oversight hearing at City Hall on March 1, 2023 in New York City. (Michael M Santiago/GettyImages/Getty Images)

Caban, who represents Astoria and remained on as a member of that caucus, was far from the only Council member incensed by the NYPD's decision not to appear.

Councilwoman Julie Won, also a Queens Democrat, suggested that in the future the Council should subpoena the Police Department to compel it to appear.

“Every single city agency is accountable by law to the City Council to be at oversight hearings. It is part of the checks-and-balances process, and for them to not show up, it is not OK,” she said. “Now, we know going forward we’ll have to subpoena the NYPD to make sure that they’ll appear at these hearings.”

Councilwoman Alexis Aviles, who represents Sunset Park in Brooklyn, vowed that the NYPD's absence Wednesday wouldn't be forgotten during the ongoing budget process.

"I'd like to implore that my colleagues remember the level of respect that the NYPD has demonstrated to this Council today, and in particular, return the favor of not showing up during our budget hearing when they're asking for more money," she said.



Council Member Alexa Avilés speaks during a rally before a City Council Oversight hearing at City Hall on March 1, 2023 in New York City. (Michael M Santiago/GettyImages/Getty Images)

Aviles added that any settlement money the city is obligated to pay due to NYPD misconduct should come out of the department's own budget.

The outrage from Council members and others wasn't relegated to only the NYPD's absence.

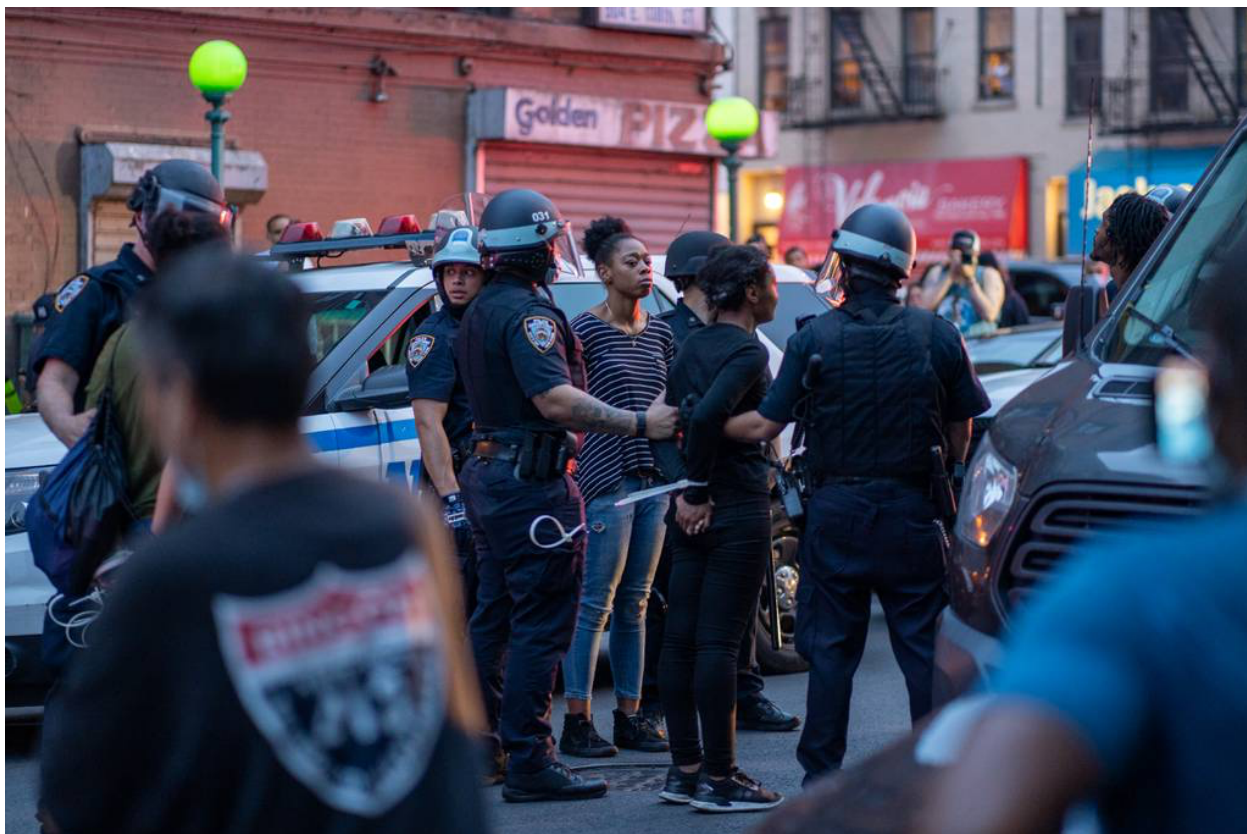
The NYPD's riot unit also came under intense scrutiny for tactics like [kettling](#) — refusing to let demonstrators disperse and then arresting them for breaking curfew — using tear gas and violently arresting protesters.

Arva Rice, interim chairwoman of the Civilian Complaint Review Board, testified that the substantiation rate of complaints made against SRG cops is 10% higher than for



officers working in other units since 2015, and part of the reason for that is the 2020 protests.

“The 2020 protest resulted in the highest rate of complaints the agency has ever seen — with 300 complaints being filed in 48 hours,” she said. “Given the large deployment of SRGs to manage the protests, this resulted in a higher rate of complaints against SRGs.”



NYPD officers arrest protesters for breaking the citywide 8 p.m. curfew on June 4, 2020 in the Bronx. (David Dee Delgado/Getty Images)

Of 321 total complaints that came out of the protests, the CCRB substantiated 88. Of those, 28 stemmed from conduct from a Strategic Response Group officer.

Rice said the relatively low rate of substantiated cases against regular cops stemmed from how difficult the board’s investigations into claims were to conduct.

“These were some of the most complicated cases the agency has ever investigated,” she said. “Forty-three percent of the allegations stemming from the 2020 protests had to be closed because the officers involved could not be identified.”

Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who's attended many protests over the years, questioned why so many cops couldn't be identified and pointed to cops covering their badges as one possible reason.



Public Advocate Jumaane Williams speaks during a rally before a City Council Oversight hearing at City Hall on March 1, 2023 in New York City. (Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images)

Rice declined to speculate as to whether officers did or didn't intentionally cover their identification, leading Williams to say that he's seen it happen firsthand.

"I did see some of that, and we've got a lot of folks who corroborate it as well," he said.

But Republican Councilwoman Joann Ariola defended the NYPD and SRG, saying the unit had been "reimagined" and "retrained" under the Adams administration and is needed in "a city under siege" with crime.

"When we're getting notifications every day of gun violence in our precincts, in our communities, and our people are dying, we cannot lesson the amount of officers we have deployed," she said. "These SRG officers are there to help precincts that are in need. They are there to remove illegal firearms and weapons from our streets."

Aside from the many criticisms leveled against the NYPD, the CCRB also came under attack at the hearing.

Councilman Chi Osse of Brooklyn contended the board lacked any power, which he said is evidenced by the fact that NYPD Commissioner Keechant Sewell failed to follow through with the board's recommendations.

"It's a completely failed board in terms of holding an agency like the NYPD accountable," he said. "The fact that the NYPD has chosen to not show up to work today proves that they are given special privileges compared to many of the other agencies that exist here in this city."